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FEMALE LANGUAGE THEORY IN THE AGE OF GOETHE: THREE CASE STUDIES

By the close of the German Romantic Movement there was in existence a well-entrenched corpus of sophisticated reflections on language by the German male writing fraternity. Herder, Goethe, Schiller, the Schlegel brothers, Tieck, Novalis, Kleist, and Jean Paul in particular theorized extensively, if not always systematically,¹ about the origin of language as well as the relationship of language to thought, aesthetics, and ethics, and their pronouncements have been methodically documented. By contrast, women authors, who, with few exceptions, remained at the margins of the mainstream poetological discourses of their day, had little scope to philosophize about language in general, let alone expatiate on gender-specific linguistic differences. Quite apart from the lack of a forum for women to espouse philosophical tenets,² the level at which women were deemed capable of philosophizing was also questioned. Friedrich Schlegel, for instance, while freely acknowledging the female aptitude for 'Spekulation, innere Anschauung des Unendlichen', doubted that women possessed any intuitive grasp of 'Abstraktion, die sich weit eher lernen läßt'.³ Not surprisingly, the male exclusiveness of *Genie*

¹ See, for example, my article, 'Goethes Sprachdenken in beziehungsgeschichtlicher Hinsicht', *Neophilologus*, 75 (1991), 239–51. It was clear to Goethe that a sharp distinction needed to be drawn between professional philosophers of language belonging to historically defined schools of thought (for example, Locke, Hume) and amateurish dabblers in language theory: 'Ein jeder, weil er spricht, glaubt auch über die Sprache sprechen zu können' (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen* 239, *Gedenkausgabe der Werke*, ed. by E. Beutler (Zürich: Artemis, 1959–66), ix, 522).

² Charlotte von Kalb, for instance, informed Goethe in a letter dated mid-September 1795 of her reticence to debate matters of intellectual substance with him. She identified these inhibitions as being linguistic and gender-driven ('Briefe von Charlotte v. Kalb an Goethe', ed. by Eduard von der Hellen, in *Goethe Jahrbuch*, 13 (1892), 52).

³ *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler, 35 vols (Munich, Paderborn, and Vienna: Schöningh, 1958–87), II, 180 (hereafter *K4*). Von Kalb seems to have shared Schlegel's dismissive stance when she writes to Schiller in the spring of 1801: 'Es ist wohl wahr das Weib kann u. soll nicht abstrahiren. Sie bedarf der Wissenschaft z[um] Leben, nicht das Leben für die Wissenschaft' ('Die Briefe Charlottens v. Kalb an Schiller. Nach den Handschriften des Goethe- und Schiller-Archivs', ed. by Julius Petersen, in *Jahrbuch der Goethe-Gesellschaft*, 12 (1891), 160). For an investigation of the nature and extent of female scholarliness, see the series of articles entitled *Gelehrsamkeit und kulturelle Emanzipation in Querelles. Jahrbuch für Frauenforschung*, 1 (1996), 1–164. This study provides a corrective to the generalized assumption about eighteenth-century women's intellectual endeavours ventured by Christine Touaillon: 'Bei keiner Frau, auch nicht der bedeutendsten, findet sich eine Spur jenes heißen Ringens um die Weltgeheimnisse, wie es Goethe und Klinger, Schiller und Lessing [. . .], ja wie es im 18. Jahrhundert bei den Männern geradezu das Merkmal jedes großen Geistes ist. Wohl lesen einzelne Frauen philosophische Werke, beschäftigen sich mit Kant und Fichte, wohnen da und dort philosophischen Vorlesungen bei, aber nirgends sieht man die Spuren eines tieferen philosophischen Interesses, nirgends bemerkt man die Ergebnisse eingehenderer Beschäftigung mit den großen Problemen der Menschheit' (*Der deutsche Frauenroman des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna and Leipzig: Braumüller, 1919), p. 640). For an outline of the achievements of three women, clearly identifiable as 'deutsche Philosophinnen' in their own right, Johanna Unzer (1725–1782), Amalie Holst (1758–1829), and Dorothea Schläzer-Rodde (1770–1825), see *Philosophinnen Lexikon*, ed. by Ursula I. Meyer and Heidemarie Bennet-Vahle (Aachen: ein-FACH-verlag, 1994). Unzer had much to say about the nexus between language and thought and about language origin theory in her popular philosophical work *Grundriß einer Weltweisheit für das Frauenzimmer* (1751). However, it regurgitates and disseminates established Enlightenment views of language (for example, the Leibnizian position), rather than furnishing original insights into the continuing language philosophy discourse.

within speculative philosophy and poetics alike greatly diminished the stature of women.⁴

I propose to venture some persuasive evidence of a *weibliches Sprachdenken* by drawing on the (mainly) confessional writings of three prominent women within the period conveniently known as the Age of Goethe: Sophie Mereau-Brentano, Rahel Varnhagen von Ense, and Bettine [Bettina] Brentano-von Arnim.⁵ All three authors enjoyed the privileges of education and social standing, moving freely in enlightened intellectual circles and literary salons, even if by today's canons of female discrimination they were eclipsed and marginalized by their male counterparts in terms of genre options and publication outlets. They were women anxious to extend their public views and literary themes well beyond the clichéd subjects of motherhood and female pedagogy.⁶

I attempt to show that this *weibliches Sprachdenken* is predicated on the need to overcome a dependency on the imitation, citation, and paraphrasing of phallogocentric language constructs (*weibliche Sprachlosigkeit*), in order to discover an 'authentic' language that could adequately incorporate the range of women's experience and ultimately facilitate the process of self-identification.⁷ It similarly poses a challenge to the male construct of a stylized female language of social intercourse underpinned by an assumption that women were not required to understand the things they expressed. Such a demeaning stance was commonly adopted by the advocates of Rousseauian pedagogics, not the least being the Storm and Stress poet J. G. Jacobi, who wrote: 'Unsere Töchter müssen die Kunst erlernen, zu glänzen, und zu erobern. Diese besteht in allerley Verstellung des Leibes und der Seele, und der Fähigkeit, die schönsten Worte zu sagen; ohne sich des Gedankens oder der Empfindung bewußt zu seyn, die sie zuweilen ausdrücken sollen' ('Frauenzimmer-Bibliothek', *Iris*, 1/2 (1774), 65; my italics). Indeed, even as late as 1798, when female cultural emancipation was supposedly beginning to gain momentum, the compiler of an outmoded pedagogical handbook for adolescent girls and their

⁴ See, on this point Minna . . . r (pseudonym), 'Weiblicher Genius. Ein Fragment', *Journal für deutsche Frauen von deutschen Frauen geschrieben*, 2/6 (1805), 100–21. Here the contributor reproduces part of an acrimonious dialogue with her spouse, who contends derisively: 'Ist es nicht ein wahres Leidwesen, wenn man hören muß, wie oft Frauen mit Männern für und wider ein philosophisches System, eine ästhetische Ansicht streiten — Frauen, denen es an den nothwendigsten Elementen des Unterrichts fehlt? Oder was meinst du dazu, wenn du Görre's Aphorismen oder Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre auf den Toiletten unter den Schminkdosen umherliegen siehst, und niemals einen vorzüglichen Geschichtschreiber, oder eine interessante Reisebeschreibung?', to which Minna counter-argues: 'Daß ihr uns das Feld der Spekulation versperren wollt, ist im Grunde eine Art Sicherheitsmaasregel, die ihr gegen uns nehmt. Ihr fürchtet, die Weiber hätten vielleicht schon von Natur eine Anlage zur Dialektik, ohne sie in den künstlichen Schlußgeweben irgend einer philosophischen Schule erst üben zu dürfen' (pp. 55–56). See also in a similar vein the contribution by an anonymous contributor entitled 'Beantwortung der Frage: Dürfen Weiber gelehrte Kenntnisse haben? Oder: Sind Weiblichkeit und wissenschaftliche Geistesbildung zu vereinigen?', *Journal für deutsche Frauen*, 1/4 (1805), 21–35. Here the male 'Universalgeist' is debunked as an often quite limited and one-sided individual (p. 31).

⁵ Critical literature on the subject is sparse indeed. In a pioneering monograph, *Die Sprachphilosophie der deutschen Romantik* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1927), Eva Fiesel makes casual mention of two female contributors to language theory, Bettine Brentano (p. 44) and Rahel Varnhagen (p. 94), while Friedrich Kainz's less ambitious essay 'Die Sprachästhetik der Jüngeren Romantik', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift*, 16 (1938), 219–57, provides no additional names. The most recent overview by Monika Schmitz-Emans identifies Varnhagen alone on the basis of a single letter ('Romantische Sprachästhetik', *Neohelicon*, 21 (1994), 359–87 (p. 368)).

⁶ The underestimated and underrated intellectual input of women in the nineteenth century is the subject of a statistically based study by Eva Kammler (*Zwischen Professionalisierung und Dilettantismus. Romane und ihre Autorinnen um 1800* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1992)).

⁷ On the forfeiture of female identity through mimesis and derivativeness, see Kammler, p. 45.

charges insists disparagingly that women simply ‘mouthed words’ without any comprehension of the concepts behind them:

Welcher Mann, der sich als Mann fühlt, kann es aushalten in der Nähe eines Weibes, das Gelehrsamkeit [. . .] als Schild aushängt, wovon sie doch nur Worte nachlallt, ohne etwas von der Sache zu wissen, die sie auch nicht wissen soll, und von der sie selten etwas Zusammenhängendes, Gründliches wissen kann? [. . .] Zu einer eigentlichen Denkerin ist also das Weib nicht bestimmt. Sie soll schauen, ahnen, fühlen, nicht forschen, grübeln, Begriffe spalten.⁸

Arguably, a good deal of female philosophizing about language was linked to the practicalities of epistolary communication and to the specific dilemma associated with private or public writing as a form of self-expression and self-conceptualization (*weibliche Schreibästhetik*).⁹ However, rather than exploring here in detail the pragmatic use of language (the register, syntax, or symbolic devices consciously employed by the writers under review (*Sprachgebrauch*)), I intend to consider the diversity of speculative observations about the very essence of language and its ability or inability to cover the spectrum of female otherness. It would, of course, be fruitless to contend that these writers engaged in a *Sprachkritik* that sprang from a need or desire to expose patriarchal sexism. Their critique of language was neither politically nor ideologically motivated, although it was clearly against the background of male-engineered stereotyping of gender-based differences of linguistic expressiveness: above all, the perception of the male language of reason, logic, and analysis in contradistinction to the female language of the heart.¹⁰

One of the patent anomalies inherent in the notion of gender-specific language orientation was the gender-unspecific elevation of the language of the heart to a cult-like obsession as the Age of Reason lost ground to the Age of Feeling in its broadest definition (*Empfindsamkeit, Sturm und Drang, Romantik*). French and German belles-lettres abound in fictional protagonists displaying all the hallmarks of Werther’s ‘unmanly’ effusiveness in both demeanour and verbal articulation. Historically, though, the dominant male perspective remained clearly delineated. Despite the semantic equation of the original language of humankind with the ‘mother tongue’, patriarchy had set the rules within Judaeo-Christian orthodoxy, ever since God bestowed upon Adam the right and authority to name things. The loss of the *Ursprache* in the wake of the Babelian confusion of tongues had only exacerbated the sharp divisions between male and female language. Wilhelm von Humboldt, renowned for his labours in the field of comparative philology, risked the generalization that in contrast to men’s language, the female linguistic register constituted a ‘treuer Spiegel ihrer Gedanken und Gefühle [. . .] Fülle, Stärke und

⁸ Johann Ludwig Ewald, *Die Kunst, ein gutes Mädchen, eine gute Gattin, Mutter und Hausfrau zu werden. Ein Handbuch für erwachsene Töchter, Gattinnen und Mütter* (Bremen: [n.p.], 1798), quoted in G. Loster-Schneider, *Sophie La Roche. Paradoxien weiblichen Schreibens im 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Narr, 1995), p. 372, note 68.

⁹ See, on this topic, Lorely French, “‘Meine beiden Ichs’”. Confrontations with Language and Self in Letters by Early Nineteenth-Century Women’, in *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies and German Culture*, 5 (1989), 73–89.

¹⁰ Moritz’s *Deutsche Sprachlehre für Damen* is one of many eighteenth-century ‘chauvinistic’ grammars to take for granted the use of almost exclusively male gender paradigms, even in the case of a targeted female readership; for example: ‘Das Wort zu führt uns gleichsam in die Seele des Mannes’, or ‘Der Mann kam aus dem Walde, er trug Stäbe auf seiner Schulter’ (Karl Philipp Moritz, *Die Schriften in dreißig Bänden*, ed. by Petra and Uwe Nettelbeck (Nördlingen: Greno, 1988), xiii, 44).

Naturgemäßigkeit'.¹¹ He was, in a sense, merely responding to the fixed public myth of women as the high priestesses of simplicity, naturalness, and virtue.

For his part, the Romantic ethicist and theologian Schleiermacher posited that women, unlike men, were no slaves to abstraction, and this was reflected in their natural, unpretentious use of language.¹² However, he did not believe in immutable boundaries. As an ardent champion of the idea of sexual equality advanced in Friedrich Schlegel's unfinished novel *Lucinde* (1799), Schleiermacher advocated a new language of male–female solidarity (Lüthi, p. 185). Women might, therefore, have had good reason to take heart from Schleiermacher's refreshing demolition of patriarchal language divisions, but in any case the gender synthesis (which Schleiermacher leaves as a hypothesis) harmonized to a large extent with the early Romantics' longing for the restoration of polarities to their original unity (*Urzustand*), inasmuch as it fitted their perception of the genderlessness of the *Ursprache*.¹³ For Friedrich Schlegel and the philosopher Franz von Baader the androgynous nature of the *Ursprache* was attributable to the mystical union of *sophia* and *logos*. Indeed, the theological concept of *sophia* as the Eternal Word of God made flesh (Boehme, Thomas Aquinas) offered a radical alternative to the patriarchy of *logos*. Yet, however tempting it might have been, the Romantics stopped short of actually ascribing a female genesis of language to the human race deduced from the *sophia* principle alone.

A further Romantic topos allied to the language of the heart was the transcendentalism of music. The novelist Caroline von Wolzogen (1763–1847) echoes a commonly held view of her time that 'Musik ist eine höhere, feinere Sprache als die der Worte. In Momenten, wo der erhöhten Seele jeder Ausdruck zu schwach scheint, wo sie verzweifelt, die feineren Nuancen ihrer Empfindung in Worte zu fesseln, da beginnt die Tonkunst'.¹⁴ Similarly, Sophie Mereau attributed to music the capacity to convey the most intimate and sacred of thoughts and emotions.¹⁵

Equally central to Romantic thinking was a preoccupation with the musical primordialism of language. Wolzogen conceives of sounds as echoing the original unity of things: 'Die Töne sind ein Verbindungsmittel, ein Laut, durch das Universum tönend, ein Nach-Anklang des Ganzen, der die Tiefe unsers Daseins kund thut' (Mereau, p. 135). Its superiority to the spoken language, she claims, is borne out by the receptiveness of some deaf people to sounds, suggesting that music is 'ethereal' rather than representing merely the effect of physical oscillations produced by 'air'. Yet a further dimension of music closely linked to poetics and forming an integral part of Johann G. Sulzer's celebrated theory of aesthetics (1771–74) is the acoustics of speech melody and rhythm, more specifically, the

¹¹ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues, Werke in fünf Bänden*, ed. by A. Fitner and K. Giel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960–1981), III, note 115, quoted in Erich Kleinschmidt, 'Sprache und Gefühle. Geschlechterdifferenz und Affekte in der Sprachpoetik des 18. Jahrhunderts', *arcadia*, 29/1 (1994), 1–19 (p. 19).

¹² Quoted in Kurt Lüthi, *Feminismus und Romantik. Sprache, Gesellschaft, Symbole, Religion* (Vienna, Cologne, and Graz: Böhlau, 1985), p. 95.

¹³ The seventeenth-century theosopher and mystic Jacob Boehme, who left such a significant imprint on German Romanticism, called the original unity of the sexes 'die männliche Jungfrau'. See, on this point, Lüthi, p. 46.

¹⁴ *Gedankenlese aus hinterlassenen Blättern, Gesammelte Schriften*, 6 vols, ed. by Peter Boerner (Hildesheim, Zurich, and New York: Olms, 1988–98), III, 141.

¹⁵ 'Musik und die Poesie können und dürfen unser Heimlichstes und Heiligstes aussprechen' (*Kalathiskos*, 2 vols (Berlin: Frölich, 1801–02), I, 191).

linkage between meaning and the way a word sounds or is pronounced (phonetics). The importance of the verbalization of sounds to the creative-writing process itself is emphasized by the author–heroine of Caroline Pichler’s epistolary novel *Frauenwürde* (1818): ‘Die Gedanken wurden deutlich, es klang mir in der Seele nach Gesang, ich hörte den Rhythmus, ich verstand endlich die Worte, nahm Bleyfeder und Paper aus dem Arbeitsbeutel und schrieb auf, was in mir tönte.’¹⁶

The Romantic conception of love is, not unlike music, equally heralded as the quintessential form of communication without words. Indeed, the spiritualization of language, the reaffirmation of its metaphysical origins, threw into question the incontrovertible nexus between language and the patriarchy of reason, thereby producing a less discriminatory climate in terms of gender-oriented language difference. Schleiermacher, for his part, posited the attainment of a higher unity of the sexes in love. Moreover, early Romanticism’s ahistorical aestheticization and transcendentalization of language shifted the emphasis away, if somewhat naively, from the functionality of *Sprache* as an historically evolved self-referential tool of social organization and interchange (Rousseau, Condillac, Herder) codified through ‘consensus’ rules; such conventions relativized and compartmentalized speech communities along the lines of sex and class. Each of the following subsections will focus more sharply on the extent to which the three writers under review endorse, enrich, or even subvert the central philosophy-of-language discourses of the Western patriarchal tradition, as well as experiment with language theories more in keeping with the aesthetics of female otherness.

Sophie Mereau-Brentano (1770–1806) was no stranger to the intelligentsia of Jena, particularly to the circles frequented by her first husband, a university librarian and later a Professor of law. Not only was she a close friend of Fichte’s predecessor, the philosopher Reinhold (1759–1823), but her attendance at Fichte’s lectures also did much to enhance her analytical skills. Significantly, she claimed to be one of the few people to understand Kant’s teachings and to live according to them.¹⁷ Her correspondence with her second spouse, Clemens Brentano, attests to the diversity of these influential connections.

Mereau was also one of the few women of her day to achieve professional writer status, albeit literary recognition at a price. Apart from the usual obstacle of being forced to adapt one’s texts to the whims of publishers, as a woman she was also expected to exercise vigilant self-censorship in order not to overstep the bounds of female decorum, the ‘Weiblich-Schickliche’ (Gersdorff, p. 236). Rescued from relative obscurity by feminist scholarship in the 1970s, Mereau is perhaps best remembered for her nature poetry and authorship of the two sentimental novels *Das Blüthenalter der Empfindung* (1794) and *Amanda und Eduard. Ein Roman in Briefen* (1803), and less so for her literary translations. Schiller, who was instrumental in launching her career with the publication of her verse after 1791, sought to safeguard her from marginalization by positioning her in the mainstream tradition of German poetry:

¹⁶ *Frauenwürde*, in Caroline Pichler, *Sämmtliche Werke*, 60 vols (Vienna: Pichler, 1828–44), x1, 35. Goethe started work on a theory of sounds (‘Klanglehre’), but nothing appears to have come of the project except a few pages of fragmentary observations appended to his *Farbenlehre*. For an analysis of the levels of character receptiveness to euphonious speech patterns in *Faust II*, see my article, ‘Language Discourses in Goethe’s “Faust II”’, in *Unravelling the Labyrinth: Decoding Text and Language*, ed. by Kerry Dunne and Ian R. Campbell (Bern and Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1997), pp. 57–73.

¹⁷ *Dich zu lieben, kann ich nicht verlernen. Das Leben der Sophie Brentano-Mereau* (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1988), p. 61.

Ich entdeckte [in Ihren Gedichten] denselben Geist der Kontemplation, der allem aufgedrückt ist, was Sie dichten. Ihre Phantasie liebt zu symbolisieren und alles, was sich ihr darstellt, als einen Ausdruck von Ideen zu behandeln. Es ist dies überhaupt der herrschende Charakterzug des deutschen poetischen Geistes, wovon uns Klopstock das erste und auffallendste Muster gegeben und dem wir alle [...] durch unsre nordisch-philosophierende Natur gedrungen folgen.

(Schiller to Sophie Mereau, Jena, 18 June 1795; quoted in Gersdorff, p. 106)

However, such compliments proved to be rare, given the largely lukewarm reception her writing attracted. Had the complications of child-bearing not cut short a creative *métier* in its prime, her critics might well have attached greater weight to it.

It is the epistolary novel *Amanda und Eduard*, rather than her correspondence, that sheds the most light on Mereau's philosophy of language. Central to this story of an unhappy marriage, which derives its dramatic tension from the disparity between love as conjugal duty and extramarital passion, is a recurring endeavour to (re)define love and happiness, particularly in terms of their relevance to the goal of female self-fulfilment. The titular heroine is, not unlike Werther, faced with the quandary of representation, at a loss for sufficient words and images to communicate specific concepts or emotions. This does not lead to language scepticism as such. For Amanda the limits of representation (naming) appear difficult only when it comes to conveying linguistically to others the uniqueness of a divinely inspired (epiphanic) moment. On this point she writes to her confidante Julien: 'Jene göttlichen Momente, wo der schöne Eindruck nur Bilder und keine Begriffe in uns erweckt, jene Augenblicke voll Unendlichkeit, die wir undeutlich nennen, weil die Sprache für sie zu arm ist — diese liegen nur in unserm Gefühl.'¹⁸ Similarly, in Mereau's earlier novel, *Das Blüthenalter der Empfindung*, the hero, consumed by passion for Nannette, also stresses the ineffability of the overwhelming moment of intense emotion: 'Der wahre Augenblick der Empfindung duldet keine Sprache' (p. 40).¹⁹

Addressing the same confidante, Amanda highlights the programmatic (post-Enlightenment) dichotomy of head and heart (*Verstand* and *Gefühl*). Her sensibilities are clearly directed towards an intuitive grasp of things. While *Verstand* (in keeping with the aforementioned consensus theory) invented signifiers ('Zeichen'), 'das unnennbare Gefühl' of love required as its most subtle catalyst 'ein[en] Blick aus dem verklärten Auge des Geliebten' (*AuE*, p. 98). Here one is reminded of the prominence J. K. Lavater afforded non-verbal 'body' language in his groundbreaking *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniss und Menschenliebe* (1775–78).²⁰ Eduard likewise trusts in a metaphysical bond of love that transcends words as well as all human understanding ('O! Einklang der Seelen! Mittheilung ohne Worte!' (*AuE*, p. 150)), alongside which the codified language of human intercommunication, the '[...] todte Buchstabe' (p. 151) of the written word, is considered a poor relation indeed. It is hardly surprising, then, that the two lovers strive to translate the quintessence of their intimacy into musical analogies. Their

¹⁸ *Amanda und Eduard. Ein Roman in Briefen*, ed. by Bettina Bremer and Angelika Schneider (Freiburg: Kore, 1993), p. 33 (hereafter *AuE*).

¹⁹ *Das Blüthenalter der Empfindung*, ed. by Herman Moens (Stuttgart: Heinz, 1982). Note also the narrator's description of the couple's joyous reunion: 'Ohne Worte verstehen sie sich im süßen idealischen Einklange aller ihrer Empfindungen' (p. 58).

²⁰ The hero of *Das Blüthenalter der Empfindung* also refers to the virtues of body language: '[Die Natur] verlieh [dem Menschen] nicht allein Sprachorgane; auch auf seine Stirn, in seine Augen legte sie den zarten Ausdruck seiner innern Gefühle', but bewails the fact that successive generations had sought to erase this 'göttliche Schrift' (p. 10).

hearts are 'gleichgestimmt[e]' (pp. 87, 130); moreover, their blissful union is repeatedly alluded to as harmony, and their painful separation as dissonance and the silencing of the music of the soul (pp. 150, 193).²¹

Elsewhere the speculative base is broadened as Amanda moves to consider the composition of the pre-linguistic *Urstand*: 'Ich bewundere dies weite Schweigen in der Natur. So dachte ich, war es im Anfang aller Dinge; aber die Liebe erschien, und alles war belebt' (*AuE*, p. 102). The allusion to 'silence' prior to nature's animation through the stirring of divine love adds a fresh dimension to the lively debate on language genesis triggered by the appearance of Süßmilch's prize-winning Academy essay of 1766. A major factor contributing to the ensuing polarization of views on the origin of language into God-given (Süßmilch, Hamann) and humanly invented (Locke, Condillac, Rousseau) language was the complex co-relationship of language and thought. Which preceded which, or were *Denken* and *Sprache*, as Herder and Novalis argued dialectically, *gleichursprünglich*? Mereau's proposition sidesteps this philosophical dilemma. It removes the emphasis placed on the parameters of logic and reason informing the well-trodden debate on the origin of language and, in line with early Romantic theosophical revelationism, identifies divine love as the primal spark behind and within earthly creation, that is, even before the incarnation of Christ as the sacrificial act of an all-loving God.

Few women of the *Goethezeit* could have claimed greater first-hand acquaintance than Rahel Varnhagen (1771–1833) with the thinking processes of the luminaries who flocked to her literary salon. They included such illustrious names as Friedrich Schlegel, Heinrich Heine, Alexander von Humboldt, Johann Fichte, and Leopold Ranke. In addition, Varnhagen derived intellectual stimulation from her close relationship with David Veit, who never questioned for a moment the need for young women to study philosophy as a mind-broadening pursuit.²² Foremost among her idols was the Jewish pantheist Spinoza, and at Veit's urging she worked her way through Hume's writings (in English). On the other hand, Varnhagen leaves us in no doubt as to the aptitude of her own sex to practise systematic philosophy: 'Wenn Fichte's Werke Frau Fichte geschrieben hätte, wären sie schlechter? Oder ist es aus der Organisation bewiesen, daß eine Frau nicht denken und ihre Gedanken nicht ausdrücken kann?' (*R*, III/3, 10).

If her Berlin attic room had become the hub of lively wit and stimulating conversation, the cult of friendship and sociability Rahel Varnhagen had fostered so

²¹ Couched in similar metaphors is the author's own assessment of her emotional estrangement from Karl Mereau, as the extract of a letter to Heinrich Kipp written in 1795 clearly attests: 'Wo das Gefühl spricht und sprechen soll, da drängt sich eine Kluft zwischen uns, wo auch nicht der leiseste harmonische Ton in die Seele des andern hinüberreicht', quoted in Katharina von Hammerstein, *Sophie Mereau-Brentano: Freiheit—Liebe—Weiblichkeit. Trikolore sozialer und individueller Selbstbestimmung um 1800* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1994), p. 229. Mereau's correspondence with the young student, who, for over a year, provided a welcome distraction from marital difficulties, bears several close textual similarities with the epistolary novel. Again, an analogy between language and music is drawn, for example in Mereau's letter of 17 June 1795: 'Nun ist es vorbei! — Zwei Wesen sind getrennt die ohne einander nicht leben können. Die Welt ist tod für mich, Harmonie ist aus allen Wesen gewichen u. in der ganzen Natur spricht kein süßer Ton mehr für mich an' (Anja Dechant, *Harmonie stiftete unsere Liebe, Phantasie erhob sie zur Begeisterung und Vernunft heiligte sie mit dem Siegel der Wahrheit: Der Briefwechsel zwischen Sophie Mereau und Johann Heinrich Kipp* (Bern and Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1996), p. 198.

²² Rahel Varnhagen. *Gesammelte Werke*, 10 vols, ed. by Konrad Feilchenfeldt, Uwe Schweikert, and Rahel E. Steiner (Munich: Matthes & Seitz, 1983), VII, 68 (hereafter *R*, with volume, part, and page numbers). The volumes referred to are: I: *Rahel. Ein Buch des Andenkens für Freunde*; II: *Rahel. Ein Buch des Andenkens für Freunde*; III: *Rahel. Ein Buch des Andenkens für Freunde*; VII: *Briefwechsel zwischen Rahel und David Veit*; VIII: *Aus Rahel's Herzensleben. Briefe und Tagebücher*; IX: *Briefe und Tagebücher aus verstreuten Quellen*.

assiduously during her lifetime found equally poignant expression in an extensive network of correspondence, which was edited and published after her death by her husband Karl August Varnhagen von Ense in 1834. So convinced was Varnhagen herself of the intrinsic value of her epistolary effusions that she insisted on their being recited in public (*R*, VII/2, 135). Clearly, then, her letter-writing never served as a substitute for a deficiency of direct communication, as it did for other women less strategically placed to break out of their gender-dictated social and cultural isolation. Varnhagen regarded her epistolary communications as an art in itself, making no apologies for glaring breaches of style and syntax. But as Katherine Goodman rightly concludes: 'It is her eccentricities that lend her style the immediacy and spontaneity of a conversation, precisely the effect she strove to achieve.'²³ Conceivably, such an unorthodox approach also implied a rejection of the patriarchal straitjacket of fixed and stultified rules of literary expression and rhetoric such as were stipulated by Gottsched and Wieland. No wonder Varnhagen defends a language authenticated by experience ('Unsere Sprache ist unser gelebtes Leben' (*R*, VIII, 158)) over and against one 'borrowed' or 'appropriated' from the symbolic order of patriarchy (Cixous/Lacan).

A healthy scepticism regarding the adequacy of words consistently informs Varnhagen's reflections on language, irrespective of whether she is universalizing via the indefinite/first-person-plural pronoun (*man . . . wir*) or relativizing such pronouncements to her own experience (*ich*). She complains of 'thoughts storming at her' (*R*, VII/1, 99) which she can never hope to transliterate, and at one point in her correspondence she asks rhetorically: 'Und wie kann man Unbeschreibliches beschreiben, *höchstens!* höchstens erzählen! höchstens? nein gar nicht, ganz und gar nicht' (*R*, I/1, 92). Elsewhere she comments on the disparity between her natural compulsion to write and the verbal impoverishment of the end product (*R*, I/1, 92). Yet on the whole, words come easily to her (unless they happen to be in a foreign language). For her the loss of the Adamic 'Ursprache', which resulted in the historical inability of human language to describe more than 'schattenartige, oberflächliche, schwindelnde Eigenschaften der Dinge' (*R*, III/3, 40), is a matter of regret rather than an existential or (post-Kantian) epistemological problem. Thus whenever she advocates 'silence', such advice does not spring from deep despair over the non-correspondence of words and the things they are supposed to signify; instead, it has to do with the appropriate timing of a remark within a social milieu. It is meaningful silence, a 'virtue' when no other choice remains: 'Wenn ich manchmal ganz schweigen muß, ist das das Höchste' (*R*, II/2, 22). Nevertheless, it is her firm contention that those who have something of real substance to convey, should not regard silence as an escape route from this obligation: 'Wer plappert, freilich, der hat keine Zeit zum Denken. Aber wer Ideen hat, muß sie mittheilen' (*R*, VIII, 202). Yet for the coy female voice confronting patriarchal silencing (for example, through censorship or 'gagging'), this injunction was obviously even harder to observe.

It is difficult to determine whether the aforementioned reference to the Adamic *Ursprache* is simply a philological reminder of the unadulterated quality of the original Hebrew tongue or whether Varnhagen has consciously entered the

²³ *Dis/Closures: Women's Autobiography in Germany between 1790 and 1914* (New York, Bern, and Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1986), p. 83.

ancestry-of-language debate on the side of supranaturalism/divine interventionism (Süßmilch). In a different context, however, she really does attempt to enunciate her views on the genesis of language by responding to an anthropological position taken by the nature philosopher Henrik Steffens. He writes: 'Allerdings war die Sprache schon da, ehe sie laut ward' (*R*, III/3, 188). Varnhagen's considered retort, '[...] daß wir den Ursprung der Sprache nicht ergründen können' (*R*, III/3, 188), reduces in importance (as did Mereau's above-mentioned stance) the issue of derivation within the whole language debate, but it is for reasons more akin to post-Kantian language philosophy. Given the unknowability of apriori reality, for early Romantics the secrets veiling the genesis of language could not be fathomed by reason or logic. They had to be accessed more imaginatively or not at all. August Wilhelm Schlegel, for one, relegates the question of the origin of language 'to the same order as asking about the original state of human beings'.²⁴ Friedrich Schlegel also sees a certain futility in this highly speculative procedure: 'Wer nicht zeigt, wie die Sprache entstehn mußte, der mag zu Hause bleiben. Träumen, wie sie entstehn konnte, kann jeder' (*KA*, XXIII, 281). Only the poet was capable of rediscovering the aboriginal language of music and poetry and of making it intelligible to others. Varnhagen does not mention this option in her letter, but suggests that a 'dunkle, aber zwingende Erinnerung' (*R*, III/3, 188) of that primordial unity is stored in the collective psyche. Friedrich Schlegel had similarly categorized poetry in its most ancient form as 'das gemeinsame Gedächtniß, oder das höhere Erinnerungsorgan des [ganzen] Menschengeschlechts' (*KA*, II, 399).

More significant for Varnhagen than the language origin discourse was the way language evolved historically as an organ of intercommunication. The ultimate *telos* of verbal and written intercourse, she argues in the humanistic tradition of Herder, consists in the fulfilment of the deepest human 'Bedürfnis', the desire for 'Geselligkeit' (*R*, III/3, 209). The accumulated wisdom of advancing years coincided with a rejection of the idle banter ('lose Gespräche') Varnhagen had come to expect from *salonniers*, and the affirmation of the (morally) accountable written word: 'Ich müßte schon einen Brief haben, wenn Recht vor Recht ginge und der Mensch etwas versprechen könnte und der andere darauf rechnen könnte' (*R*, IX, 33). Thus she touches on an important aspect of the language agenda: the relationship of language to ethics (*Sprachethik*), about which Herder has a good deal to say in his speculative writings.²⁵

Bettine von Arnim (1785–1859), sister of the Romantic poet Clemens Brentano, is well known in German literary history for her exchange of letters with Goethe between 1807 and 1811, as well as for her 'life' of the gifted, but misunderstood poet Karoline von Günderode, with whom she corresponded for four years until the latter's tragic suicide in 1806. The epistolary novels *Goethes Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde* (1835) and *Die Günderode* (1840) constitute the fictional reworking of first-hand encounters and experiences dating back to her youth and the pioneering years of German Romanticism. Like most young women of her class and education, she was exposed quite early in life to the social and intellectual ambience of the salon, thanks

²⁴ Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 270.

²⁵ On this aspect of language, see my article, 'Herder and the Misuse of Language', in *Herder Jahrbuch/Herder Yearbook*, 3 (1996), 81–92.

to Sophie La Roche, who steered her grand-daughter's formative cultural development after 1793. Later, the literary connections forged by Clemens and her writer-husband Achim von Arnim brought her into close contact with the Jena and Heidelberg schools of Romanticism.²⁶ Following her husband's death in 1831, Arnim established her own highly respected salon, which served as both a cultural focus and a forum for liberal politics.²⁷

Edith Waldstein argues that Arnim was attuned to post-Kantian idealism in embracing two primary concepts of Romantic philosophy, 'the organic and *Geselligkeit*' (Waldstein, p. 94). I would further suggest that her pronouncements on language, largely confined to the (auto)biographical correspondence within *Die Günderröde*, also mirror mainstream trends in philosophical thinking of the time. The revelations themselves betray a remarkable mixture of youthful spontaneity and maturer reflection. Indeed, Clemens Brentano afforded her due credit for original insights well ahead of their time.²⁸

Of special interest is the nexus between language and music, about which Arnim could speak with some authority and commitment, having received a thorough grounding in theory, harmony, composition, and vocal technique from the age of twenty-three.²⁹ For her, music is the language of the soul inasmuch as it constitutes the direct self-revelation of the divine in the world: 'Die Berührung zwischen Gott und der Seele ist Musik' (G, p. 320). Such a symbiosis, in contrast to the fine arts, requires no mediating objects ('Gegenstände') for 'der Mensch selbst ist die Empfängnis' (Milch, p. 143). An insurmountable obstacle arises, however, with any attempt by mortals as passive beneficiaries of this divine language ('erhabene Musik' (G, p. 177)) to reproduce its essence adequately, once it is implanted in their soul. Human vocal creations ('Arien' and 'Operngesänge') appear as mere artifice, as the 'Deklamation einer Begeisterung', compared with the impeccable purity of the nightingale's song (G, p. 177). Indeed, throughout the book, Arnim displays a sustained fascination with the expressiveness of sound as opposed to the functionality of the sign. (Poetic) concern with the way words sound or should sound (*Klangästhetik*) determines whether they should be uttered at all:

Ich sag Dir, wenn ich geschwiegen hab, so ist das, weil mir die Worte nicht wohltönend genug vorkamen, ich seh mich im Geist um nach Klang, wenn ich etwas sagen will, da find ich keinen Ton, der stimmt, und Du kannst mir's glauben, manches laß ich ungesagt, weil ich's nicht edel auszusprechen vermag. (G, p. 255)

Her statement betrays her private and largely unorthodox form of language scepticism. It represents a decisive departure from the familiar philosophical qualms about the non-correlation of signs and signifiers.

A topical philosophical issue tackled by Arnim, whether wittingly or intuitively, pertains to the process by which thought becomes speech. Adopting a metaphysical rather than a scientific stance, she substitutes the quasi-magical idea of 'transfiguration' (a keynote of Romanticism) for the anthropological concept of an evolutionary

²⁶ Her connections with the Schlegels, Novalis, Fichte, Tieck, Baader, and Schelling are reasonably well documented. See, for example, Sabine Schormann, 'Bettines Rezeption der frühromantischen Philosophie', *Internationales Jahrbuch der Bettina-von-Arnim-Gesellschaft*, 3 (1989), 31–46.

²⁷ On this point, see Edith Waldstein, *Bettine von Arnim and the Politics of Romantic Conversation* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1988), p. 31.

²⁸ Bettine von Arnim, *Die Günderröde. Mit einem Essay von Christa Wolf* (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1983), p. 264 (hereafter G).

²⁹ Werner Milch, *Die junge Bettine 1785–1811* (Heidelberg: Stiehm, 1968), p. 141.

bridge linking thought to primitive (interjectional) cries and ultimately to speech communities (Condillac, Herder). For her, thought transforms itself directly into music, and by inference, into language itself: 'Denn jeder Gedanke hat eine Verklärung, das ist Musik, die muß Sprache sein, alle Sprache muß Musik sein' (G, p. 255). The actual catalyst or transformational agent is 'Rhythmus', which together with 'Begeisterung', a typically Romantic quality of heightened perception, facilitates the mind's conceptualization process. Eventually, raw thought is refined into 'Philosophie als höchste geistige Poesie' (G, p. 320). If music is the 'signature tune' of spirit ('Geist'), so too is love, Arnim views love as intrinsic to the conversational interaction between individuals and their maker: 'Wen Gott liebt, mit dem führt er Gespräche, also bloß Liebesgespräche' (G, p. 254). This language is a 'Selbstsprache' that can 'sich [...] aussprechen und sich auch beantworten', operating thus autonomously outside the self-referential confines of the phenomenal sphere, Kant's *Erscheinungswelt*.

In seeking to extend the communicative scope of language from the purely interpersonal to the notion of 'dialoguing' with God, Arnim anticipates a discourse model crucial to Karl Barth's theology of language: the attempt to define the nature of a transcendental *logos* that is nevertheless immanently apprehensible in the language we speak and read.³⁰ Arnim's standpoint is fundamentally christological: God revealed is simultaneously God incarnate and God inverbate. Such faith in the immediacy or directness of revelation is understandably simplistic against the background of the post-Wittgensteinian belief in language as a hermetically sealed human construct. In his *Redephilosophie* Barth as a neo-Kantian obviated the problem of immediate access to the voice of God dialectically by first positing the need to 'read the Bible as history, or as ethics, or as ecclesiology before arriving at the place where hermeneutics dissolve into the experience of direct encounter, or hearing' (Ward, p. 88).

Just as significant for Arnim are the dialogic cross-currents flowing between the individual and nature. Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* springs irresistibly to mind when she alludes to the human soul's communion with the soul of organic nature (G, p. 274).³¹ However, Arnim conceives of this love relationship not as *agape* but more as a kind of erotic intimacy, the fulfilment, as it were, of Faust's Storm-and-Stress longing to grasp nature's breasts: '[Die Natur] küßt mich beständig, [...] dieses Küssen ist aber Sprechen, ich könnte sagen: Natur, dein Kuß spricht in meine Seele hinein' (p. 273).³²

Inevitably, Arnim broaches the subject of the inefficacy of words as a vehicle of expression. The crisis of representation is identified in general terms as a failure to translate 'Gottespoesie' into a language intelligible to the crowd (G, p. 320). Equally though, it stems from her periodic loss of confidence in her own creative drive. She bewails the fragility of words at the moment of highest receptivity to the stirring of the muse: 'Es schmerzt mich tief, [...] daß alle Sprache, mit der ich mein Sinnen

³⁰ Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 91.

³¹ She feels much more at ease in the realm of nature philosophy than in the other branches of philosophy such as logic and mathematics, and is innately suspicious of the 'Philosoph mit seinem Dreieck' (G, p. 22).

³² Arnim recalls, from her own experience of an outing into the countryside during her convent days, the explicitly sensuous delights of nature's touch, sounds, taste and smell, especially the sensation of being caressed by nature (G, p. 278).

festzuhalten versuche, nur wie dürres Holz in der Glut meines Herzens zusammenbrennt' (p. 393). The problem appears not to be gender-related; it has more to do with an appropriate temperamental and artistic disposition towards the writing process per se, as the following self-observation would indicate: 'Wenn ich schreiben will, ist die Luft leer von Gedanken, und die meisten Worte sind überflüssig' (p. 116). For Arnim, the elusiveness of thoughts and the words that articulate them contrasts markedly with the medium of music, which is able to marshal thoughts and train them directly on the object of inward contemplation: 'Bei Musik [fahren] die Gedanken nicht herum, sie sind still und schauen innerlich Ding' (p. 117).

As for the role of language in the representation of truth, a major preoccupation of language philosophers since classical antiquity (compare the Socratic dialogues), Arnim's theories encompass both aesthetic and ethical considerations.³³ The truth(fulness) of things hinges on just how 'melodisch' (G, p. 21) the words used to denote them sound to the human ear. In moral terms, the yardstick of rightness is the verdict of the 'innere Stimme' (p. 376) or 'innerliche Wahrheitsstimme' (p. 401), operating independently of the codified/institutional language systems that have been a source of conceptual and ethical misunderstanding ever since the Babelian 'Verwirrung' (p. 376).

These case studies have highlighted the seriousness with which at least three German intellectual women writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries theorized about language. In so doing they took advantage of a *zeitgeist* that reduced emphasis on the rational, the very principle women as so-called creatures of emotion and passion were deemed incapable of fostering. Varnhagen conveniently perpetuates the stereotype ('Die Vernunft ist die Sphäre des Mannes' (R, VII/2, 127)), thereby allowing room for female experimentation with the non-analytical, affective use of language.

While their discussions of language issues are not cast in the formal mould of discursive essays or academic treatises, Mereau, Varnhagen, and Arnim none the less disclose a keen receptiveness to the range of critical perspectives covered within and biased towards this traditionally patriarchal inquiry: the origin-of-language controversy, as well as the relationship of language to thought, meaning, ethics, and poetics. By keeping the transcendentalism of language in sharp focus, they also helped to shape the contemporary idealist discourse itself, both consciously and intuitively, if less publicly and forcefully than the Parisian born *salonnière* and literary theorist Madame de Staël (1766–1817).³⁴ Ironically, the very intellectuals (Fichte, Schelling, and Schleiermacher) who monopolized the limelight of German idealism as formative influences contributed only half-heartedly to the language debate in the sense that none of them could lay claim to a systematic philosophy of language.³⁵

³³ She is highly critical of philosophers, above all Fichte and Kant, who write unnaturally or incomprehensibly, thereby actually obscuring the truth. This point is stressed by Lorely French, *German Women as Letter Writers: 1750–1850* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), p. 235.

³⁴ De Staël's thoughts on language, which are an important component of her theory of Romantic poesy, are contained in a review essay (1800) of de Gérando's book *Des signes et de l'art de penser considérés dans leurs rapports mutuels*. The review has been reprinted in Leo Neppi Modona, 'Un article de Madame de Staël dans le premier numéro de la Bibliothèque Française de Charles Pongens (1800)', *Cahiers Staëliens*, Nouvelle Série, 7 (1968), 1731.

³⁵ 'Es ist eine überraschende Tatsache, daß die Sprachphilosophen der romantischen Epoche keine Berufsphilosophen waren und daß die großen Philosophen der Zeit keine Sprachphilosophie entwickelt haben' (Helmut Gipper, 'Sprachphilosophie in der Romantik', in *Sprachphilosophie. Ein internationales Handbuch zeitgenössischer Forschung*, ed. by Marcelo Dascal and others (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1992), p. 219).

Alongside speculations about the nature of language in general, however, there exists an undeniable gender-driven *need* to reflect on language as an integral part of the process of female self-definition, and for this reason the pronouncements, however universal and objective their intended applicability, cannot always be divorced from gender-specific existential concerns or the pragmatics of a *weibliche Schreibpraxis*. In this regard, male and female agendas differ. Novalis's belief in the magical, transformational properties of language and Friedrich Schlegel's optimistic foreshadowing of the birth of a 'neue Sprache' and a 'neue Mythologie' (*KA*, xvii, 394) could not possibly have taken into account the desire by women, whether covert or overtly expressed, to reinvent language on their own terms or to create new myths and symbols of female empowerment. Yet one would tend to share Lüthi's doubts that Romantic women writers developed 'weibliche Sprachsymbole' as an ideological challenge to male authority (Lüthi, p. 168). More recent poststructuralist *écriture féminine* has responded to feminist semiological and psychoanalytic theory (Kristeva) through the construction of texts that give compensatory prominence to semiotic elements within the unavoidable symbolic (phallogocentric) order. The semiotic domain, in which preverbal 'pulsions' (Kristeva) are deemed to produce an infinite number of signifiers,³⁶ includes sound and rhythm in language,³⁷ indeed, the very elements for which Mereau and Arnim show a marked predilection.

It seems fitting to conclude this analysis by returning to Friedrich Schlegel's misgivings about the female capacity to think *in abstracto*. A maze of contradictions on the subject of *Weiblichkeit*, Schlegel nevertheless concedes in one of his poetological fragments: 'In allem Romantischen das Weibliche herrschend' (*KA*, xvii, 302), an assertion that should, by rights, validate the importance of the hitherto sparsely researched female contribution to the philosophy of language in late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century Germany.³⁸

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³⁶ *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, ed. by Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto, Buffalo, NY, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 47.

³⁷ See Margret Brüggemann, 'Weiblichkeit im Spiel der Sprache. Über das Verhältnis von Psychologie und "écriture féminine"', in *Frauen — Literatur — Geschichte: schreibende Frauen vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. by Hiltrud Gnüg and Renate Möhrmann (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1985), p. 414.

³⁸ I am grateful to the Stiftung Weimarer Klassik for generously supporting the research leading to this article.